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Invasive Species

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Chapter 1 by Izzy

I sifted through the rubble on the surface for the very last time two weeks ago. I thought I could find him. I thought I could help him.

I saw my son's scarred face for the very last time two weeks ago.

The war-torn landscape was full of others like me, tearing through the aftermath of the nuclear attacks searching for a hint of survivors. But there was no one. Only a lucky (unlucky?) few remained. Our species had torn itself apart - it had torn apart my son.

Now it is all up to me. I am in control of the vessel. I can pilot the remaining humans wherever I want, and I face a decision that any one human should never have to make.

Do I take us to another inhabited planet, so we can grow more and more until we destroy this planet like we destroyed our own?

Or do I pilot the whole thing into the nearest star, erasing any chance of our invasive species destroying anything more?

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I do neither. I keep flying. The passengers will be none the wiser.

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How to fly to the nearest star

While I'm on my apathy tirade, I might as well kick this oversized tin bucket into autopilot. I fiddle around with the controls for a bit until they are to my liking, then kick my feet up on the dashboard. The cockpit is empty. Once upon a time, this place would have been teeming with earthlings, most of whom would scold me for my blatant disregard of spaceship protocol - or for being a woman in charge of an entire vessel.

But those days are long gone, just like the Earth itself.

Vahanna was our third planet to date. The Congress that we had set up was in shambles, of course, but it was last minute, it could have been refined, could have lasted, had those fools in Community Six not been impatient. It was named after our last president on Earth as a reminder of peace to everyone who lived there - everyone who wasn't a native species, of course. We cleared them out with our guns into order to erect the Communities to begin with. And what did we leave them with? Enough radiation to last twenty lifetimes.

And, of course, countless bodies.

I wince, thinking of my son. He wasn't exactly my son, so to speak. I haven't been near a man that intimately for ten years. I leave the continuation of our species to the Breeders; such work is below a captain. But he was a beloved underling. He was supposed to take command of the ship in my eventual absence. And he was so young, too...my favorite of them all, if I really allowed myself to admit to such a blatant bias.

I lean back in my commander's chair, running a hand through my hair. I have to remain emotionless. I have to choose more children to take on my work. I have to kickstart the aptitude tests. I have to make sure that they don't all die, like last time.

But I don't want to. I just want to continue staring out into space, where there is black and emptiness.

I need to be like the vacuum in my command - able to take in everything and nothing at all.

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As I gazed out into the void, I realized that there were still so many possibilities of space overwhelmed me. I

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destroy? How many more lives were to be lost, human and indigenous, simply because of our destructive nature? Could we ever really find peace?

What was our legacy so far as a civilization, as a people, as humans? Smoking, radiation filled, craters? Millions of bodies atomized or thrown lifeless into the rubble? The three worlds to date, destroyed out of our own folly and arrogance? Did we deserve to continue existing? Were we worth a *fourth* chance at life, or would that too be taken away by opposing forces?

All these questions and more weighed heavily on my mind. For the time being I had chosen not to act, to be apathetic, but, who knows, that might change. The responsibility for what humanity's future will be, lied with me, an old Fleet captain. None of my years of training at the Fleet Academy had prepared me for this, in fact, I doubt anything could have. Besides, nothing had prepared me for the destruction of Vahanna and the death of my apprentice. As the familiar ache of loss began to throb again, I shut my eyes, unwilling to continue pondering the decision that was thrust upon me. I slowly drift off into a blissful oblivion.

Then I am lost.

Suddenly, I am ripped out of my dreamless slumber by blaring sirens and pulsing lights. As I try to spring up from the captain's seat, I lose my balance and topple over. The star chart panel lights up first, flashing white and red above my head on the command console. We were at the edge of the Cerasti Sector of charted space. Not good.

I read the warning notification popping up in the holo-panel in front of me. Seems like the ship had detected a black hole in the previous auto-generated flight path and had adjusted accordingly. Now we were about to face even more trouble on the edge of unexplored space.

Crap! I mentally scolded myself. *I must've dosed off before I double-checked the flight course!*

As I became oriented again and the grogginess wore off, I peered down at the many consoles displayed before me at the main controls. Dozens of holo-screens, dials, and buttons lit up, all

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"Captain Ferocii, we seem to have encountered some hostile vessels approaching quickly from the small moon of CI-48b. Course of action ma'am?" said Anita calmly from her post at the navigators station.

"Vessels? Impossible. No one else survived. There's no way. Double-check the scanners again Ensign, now!"

Anita brought up the long range scanner, verifying that, indeed, there were two medium sized blips closing in our location fast. Normally, the ship's computer would analyze and automatically identify any registered ship that was in Fleet records. These ships displayed no such data. A knot of foreboding slowly tightened in my stomach.

"How far out are the ships Lieutenant?"

"About 600 AU's Captain. Should I turn on the main thrusters and attempt to evade enemy pursuit?"

"No. Lets see what they want with us first, before we make any rash decisions. In fact... Ensign is there any record of CI-48b being inhabited by sentient life?"

"One moment Captain... no ma'am, it shows here, according to Fleet records, that the moon is unable to support life due to a high levels of nitrogen dioxide in the atmosphere."

This troubled me greatly; these unidentified crafts already knew we were coming. I had sent word via the general comms about the destruction and tragedy that took place on Vahanna. It hadn't been the only colony in the cosmos that was a result of human interstellar expansion. Thus, it was just common sense to inform any other other outposts of the events that had taken place on the recently founded Vahanna.

I realized that I had let the ship drift aimlessly for a while, but, before dozing off, I unwittingly plugged in the autopilot for the nearest colony, Mar'sonai. Yet, even though I had sent word before hand, long range space communications were still being tested and developed when the

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The knot in my stomach grew tighter, something was very, very wrong.

"Captain the unidentified vessels are within hailing range, should I attempt to establish comms?" Anita looked up at me, eyes hard with a cool calmness. I wasn't surprised of course, that's what the Fleet Academy did to you, they altered all incoming recruits now, or rather used too. They had made them '*devoid of all fear*' supposedly.

"Go ahead Ensign, send the standard identification request," I replied.

"Yes Captain." She cleared her throat and proceeded to bring up the communications holoscreen, where she tapped the hailing frequency of the two incoming ships.

"This is the S.S. Tomoe Gozen, of the United Federation Space Fleet. Unidentified vessels please state your official callsigns and intent. If these requests are ignored we will perceive your actions as aggressive and retaliate accordingly!"

The return comms crackled fiercely and there was an audible transition as the large screen on the bridge window popped up, revealing the face of an older woman. She was at least in her late fifties, with drab silver hair cut short to shoulder length. She wore the tattered uniform of the Congressional Guard. She smiled, a gruesome and hideous site.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" She feigned incredulity, then smirked, her silver hair bobbing.

"Looks like we're weren't the only ones to survive the fallout, hmm? No matter. While it is good to see you Captain Ferocii, I'm afraid that the survival of you and all the people on your ship are a terrible mistake. One that I intend to thoroughly correct myself. No one was supposed to survive..." she trailed off and the transmission was cut off.

Chapter 4 by Opulence



I swore, and there was a moment of silence before Anita cleared her throat and said, with

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I didn't grace her with an answer.

Despite his looks, he's a

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"Just shut up for a minute would you!" I snapped, cutting him off, "I need a minute to think". 'Hostilities seem to be imminent', we're about to be shot out of the sky and the best these two can come up with was 'hostilities seem to be imminent'. These rookies were clearly overlooking the fact that you can't just shoot up a United Federation ship and expect the UF to take you in with open arms. My son wouldn't have acted like this, he was trained but at least he had some semblance of humanity, unlike the machine-like cadets that currently manned my bridge.

I must admit, I was a bit shocked to see that the UF were going to sweep the last survivors under the rug like we were some sort of scandal. It wasn't that I didn't think they were capable of it, god knows they had more than enough firepower for that, but they always seemed to be nothing more than a by-the-books tedious yet benign sort of place, whose greatest sin was making you file enough paperwork to fill one of the Academy's lecture halls.

One of the strangest parts of the whole situation was that withered old Congressional Guard. She had known me, known my name, and something about that was incredibly unnerving. Not to mention the fact that the congressional guard should have been some of the first people lost in the destruction of earth. I scoured my mind for any memories of her, but came up with nothing. Surely I would have remembered a face like that.

Something about the whole situation was strange, but I hardly had time to scratch the surface of it when Deraak cut in.

"Captain. The behaviour of the Congressional Guard ship seems to be highly out of protocol for a United Federation vessel"

I was about to retort about how bleedingly obvious that was, and that Deraak should shut up before I put him back in extended stasis when he said something that stopped me in my tracks.

"Their orders must have been changed"

Orders! Of course, there had to be a reason for them to destroy us, someone wanted the last survivors of earth dead and I had no idea why.

I wracked my brain for an answer.

What did the last bastion of earth have that was so damn important

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It wasn't that. Never that at all. Daraak was smart, but there was no way the UF would just easily wish us aside.

The Congressional Guard was one of us - a survivor of the nuclear winter that had destroyed the planet. There was only one reason why they would turn on us.

"Open the communications channel again." Obediently, the screen flashed back up, revealing the woman grinning widely.

"Come to chat with me before your doom?" She directed the camera to her finger, hovering above the intercom button. "With one push I can command my men to fire. So tell me your last words, Ferocii. I want to hear you scream."

Swallowing back my nervousness, I looked up calmly and coolly. "You're not part of the Congressional Guard."

"Oh, really? Then what am I?"

"Dead meat." I cut off the communications channel again. Sadistic freak. Looking to my two cadets, I ordered them to engage the boosters. "Set a plot for a collision course. We can't avoid them, so we're going to hit them where it hurts."

Anita looked disjointed, though she obeyed my order. "But, with all due respect, sir, there are civilians on this ship."

"Calm down, Ensign. I know what I'm doing. If there's one thing I know about Zydokians, they value self-preservation above all else. Just like us."

"Zydokians, sir?" The shapeshifting menace of the universe. We were going to end this. Now.

Chapter 6 by intellikat



The Tomoe Gozen's propulsion engines flared up, and on the screen before her, Ferocii mentally

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Strange. She thought it the end of the world, but she had only minutes before the call to combat was answered. [Login](#) or [Create new account](#)

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"Ma'am." Deraak this time. "Wouldn't a warning volley from the main turret be sufficient? What if..." the lieutenant trailed off.

"What if I'm wrong?" Ferocii didn't answer. "Taking control of the helm now."

Ferocii switched over control of the ship to the panel before her with a flurry of touches. Beyond, the pinpricks of light began to shift.

"Engines at full, ma'am."

The Zydokian at the helm of the lead ship swiveled to face his crew, and in that instant the face of the Congressional Guard captain seemed to melt away to reveal the slightly orange tint beneath and the many creases and crevices that made up the alien's true visage.

"Impact imminent," spoke a being at a panel behind him. "Trajectory and engines on commit."

"Evade, evade," called the Zydokian captain. "Power the grapple beam."

"I'm seeing a surge in power coming up on the lead ship, ma'am," said Deraak. "It's not their shields, and it's not their cannon."

"They don't have any guns. They would have held us at distance if they did. We're going to push them out of the way and then close to the far side of that moon. In the time it takes for them to maneuver around, I want us in the clear. Give me the opportunity for one more hail then."

"Ma'am."

The Tomoe Gozen was roughly twice the size of either craft, and as it neared, the two attacking vessels split paths as an axe cleaves a block of wood. The Federation jumpship passed cleanly

between the two alien ships, and as the Tomoe Gozen closed in, the two alien ships merged into a single, larger vessel.

Ferocii's skin turned light

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The bridge shuddered

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What was that?

"Not a weapon, ma'am. Deflectors intact. But our impulse has dropped to sixty-three percent."

"Tractor beam. They're trying to catch a ride. If they can board us, they may have enough manpower to take the ship." Ferocci was out of her seat. "You have the bridge, Deraak. On me, Anita. We've got to sever that beam before they close distance."

Chapter 7 by Dan Ramazan



We lost. We failed to sever the beam. I knew that we didn't have many chances. Zydokians were better than us as pilots, and their equipment was more advanced than ours. But I was ready for this development of events. While Anita and I were trying to stop the beam, Deraak was working with weapons squadron. There were only 8 fighters, but they were capable of handling these aliens. At least, I believed so. They occupied positions around the airlock. The rest of the crew took refuge in their cabins.

Deraak returned. We focused all our attention on the screen. We could see the whole ship on it, thanks to our camera system.

Finally, complete darkness surrounded our ship and bright points of stars disappeared. The beam drew us inside the enemy ship. The invasion was about to begin.

They blew up the airlock. Quick and effective. Our cameras became useless. We couldn't see anything because of the smoke. And then the slaughter began. We heard a few shots and a few screams. After that there was total silence. I looked at Anita and Deraak. They were stunned. Squadron's chances weren't great, but this was unexpected. They were killed in less than a minute. And then another explosion shook our bridge. I was thrown to the wall by the explosion. While I tried to recover, a short fight on the bridge was over. Deraak and Anita were unconscious, and this woman in guard's uniform stood before me.

"Why don't you stop this masquerade?" I could barely speak. "I know who you are, Zydokian." "Masquerade?" She asked glumly. "I'm a human. A zydokian would kill everyone who stood in its way. I simply stunned your crew."

I didn't believe this creature. But why would she deceive me? And if she speaks the truth, then how could an old woman defeat the whole squadron? While I was trying to figure this out, four

aliens came to the bridge. They were wearing

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Athena frowned, "I request you to transfer management of the ship to me in connection with the death of Captain Ferocii."

"The official confirmation of Captain Ferocii is required," computer repeated.

Athena looked at me angrily. Despite my deplorable condition, I smiled, "I rewrote its protocols. Programmers of congressional guard will easily restore it. Though, I doubt that any of them survived."

"You have two options - you give me your ship, and the crew lives. Or we'll destroy the whole ship, as we originally planned." Athena looked calm but her eyes were furious. "Your idiotic ram attempt allowed us to capture the ship, and this crew got a chance to survive. You won't give the ship - they will lose this chance."

"And what kind of life awaits them?" I got angry. I began to believe her. If she really was a human, then I looked at the traitor. She preferred to work with the aliens and abandoned her own kind. I didn't want to believe that she was human.

Athena didn't answer. I had the feeling that she was talking to someone. Then she slowly approached me and grabbed my arm.

"What are you doing?" I tried to break free. Unsuccessfully. From the sleeve of her uniform crept something colorless and formless. This thing tried to reach me. I fought even harder, but when it touched my hand, I stopped resisting. I was seized with a strange apathy. And then I heard a voice in my head: "Do you hear me? Athena didn't convince you. I feel it. I think I'll do better."

Chapter 8 by Dan Ramazan



Dozens, then hundreds of pictures appeared before me. While this calm voice was talking in my head, I've seen the long history of a whole nation. It showed me their home planet - it looked like Earth, untouched by civilization. Earth without people. I've seen impassable jungle, but the greenery was not as bright, as in our world. It looked muffled. Every leaf and every blade of grass were covered with this pale slime, which now covered my palm.

"You can call us Helpers." Helper was old. He obviously existed long before we went into space. Perhaps, he was even older than the Zydokians. I understood why they found us, why Athena

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"How you know you can't do it?" I asked. "I'm not a computer, I'm a human. I have a mind. I opened my eyes and involuntarily flinched. She held my hand with her cold fingers and completely ignored me. Her gaze was

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riveted on a colorless slime, crawling over my arm. She was tense and... scared? I wasn't sure of it, but I didn't doubt, that Athena was eagerly waiting for Helper's return. When he touched her hand again, she exhaled with relief and closed her eyes. It was only a moment of weakness, the next second she straightened up, and a strong and cruel officer looked at me. She turned away. I looked around the room. Three Zydokians were talking quietly among themselves. The fourth approached me and waited for something. I couldn't say anything. My body seemed rubbery to me. Contact with Helper didn't pass without a trace.

"Don't expect answers from her now. She won't recover soon. Begin." She nodded to the fourth Zydokian. He again looked at my face, with pity, as it seemed to me, and closed his eyes. His breathing quickened. His face changed, swelled, becoming formless, then began to shape into something familiar. In the next moment, my double approached the control panel.

"I transfer management of the ship," he croaked in a choked voice and leaned heavily on the panel. His whole body was trembling.

"Management of the ship was transferred to Athena Adamidi. Welcome aboard, Captain," cheerfully answered the computer.

"Finally. You can leave my ship now." Athena folded her arms behind her back and, narrowing her eyes, looked at three Zydokians. They didn't like Athena's orders. One of them grinned at her and the other two shouted something in their own language, consisting of loud clicking sounds.

"Return to the ship. Accompany this vessel to the final destination. Until the end of the mission, I'll stay here." My double said slowly. It was still hard for him to speak. He waited until his soldiers left the bridge and fell into the commander's chair.

"I can play the role of the captain of this ship if she won't agree," he said quietly, looking at me.

"I can handle the crew," Athena responded. She came closer to me. "I'm surprised you're still conscious." I couldn't hear anything else. Everything went black.

I woke up in the dark. I tried to get up and hit hard on the pod's glass door. I tried to open it with a voice command, but it didn't react. The control panel on the side was blocked. I began to bang on the glass. I heard a voice and footsteps, muffled by the glass. With a slight buzz, the pod opened. I was blinded by a white light. When I got used to it, I recognized the medical room of

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understood that but felt bad anyway. Nathalie was still waiting for my answer. I nodded to her in response.

Natalie switched on the communicator on the wall. Deraak appeared on the monitor.

"Ex-Captain Ferocii! You are awake." The same polite smile appeared on Deraak's face. "I will go down to the medical room immediately and take you to Captain Athena. She's expecting you."

Ex-captain. These words grated on my ears and brought back all memories of losing the ship. A kaleidoscope of bright images which Helper had shown me flashed again before my eyes. Then I realized that Natalie was telling me something.

"...for 18 hours already. You'll never guess our final destination. We are flying..."

She was wrong. I remembered everything Helper said to me so I knew perfectly well where we were going.

"...to Earth!"

Chapter 9 by Dan Ramazan



Deraak and I walked along the ship's corridors. The crew members met me in different ways. Some turned away and pretended that they didn't notice me. Others smiled and greeted me, just like Deraak and Natalie did. But something united them. Their voices sounded joyful, they looked happy.

During my service, I saw this before. For too long they had been traveling in space without any hope to succeed and now they finally found a purpose. But that didn't seem right. A very unpleasant thought crept into my head. They didn't know what price we would pay for the return of our home.

"Deraak, what do you know about Helper?"

"What helper? What are you talking about.." He hesitated. I realized that he didn't know how to address me. When Athena was near, he called me an ex captain, but now he looked embarrassed. There he was, the man who stood on the bridge next to me seven days a week. Yes, I really didn't get along with my cadets.

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"Is that all you know?"

"I think it's more than enough." Perhaps, for the first time, I saw him smiling sincerely. It was no wonder that Athena didn't have any problems with the crew. I myself would be happy with such news. But this was very different from what I had learned from the Helper.

We entered the bridge.

"Captain Adamidi, I brought the ex-captain Ferocii." Athena just nodded and continued to listen to the on-board computer's report.

"... male, twenty-seven years old, a botanist." She was looking through the crew members' personal files. A botanist, twenty-seven years old. Most likely, it was someone from the cryogenic chambers. So, the preparation for the settlement of Earth was well under way.

Anita was showing the navigation panel to a tall blond in an unusual uniform. When she noticed me, she smiled encouragingly, but said nothing. Her companion simply ignored me. I couldn't remember his face, but I recognized the uniform. The shape-shifter. So, he changed his look again. I wondered whose face he took.

The computer finished reading the file. Athena walked away from the control panel and looked first at me, then at the cadets. "Anita, check the condition of the cryogenic chambers. Deraak, go with her."

I felt uncomfortable. I didn't want to stay with Athena and the Zydokian.

"Are you afraid that they'll hear the truth?" My cadets stopped.

"So, you're not going to join us." Athena's face became deformed by anger, but it wasn't she, who answered me. Zydokian's new voice was nice, but unnatural. Like a voice of stereotypical Disney prince.

What possibly can't you like in... See more of Story Wars... than the end of the movie.

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her hand, urging me to begin. I was surprised by these words. Her mood changed too fast. Then I looked at the colorless mass that was stirring on her wrist.

I gathered my thoughts and looked at my cadets. They looked as confused as I was. Would they believe me? In any case, I didn't have any other options. So I began to tell.

Chapter 10 by Dan Ramazan



"Look at the clot on Athena's wrist. It was he, who helped her to defeat the squadron, because of him, she made an alliance with Zydokians. This is an alien parasite, he feeds on her, and Athena takes orders from him."

"You forgot the most important thing. This "parasite" is the only reason you are still alive. If not for him, Athena would have killed you right after she captured the ship." The blond looked at me with a tired mocking smile, as if everything I was saying wasn't only meaningless, but also stupid.

"Be quiet, please. Let her speak." Athena nodded at me, "Go on, Adriana."

"When you were unconscious, this alien spoke to me. He called himself Helper and showed me the history of his species. I saw how they covered all life forms on their planet, and then went into space, seeking for new hosts. They turned Zydokians into shape-shifters and now parasitize on them." I was expecting Helper to interrupt me, but he listened in silence.

"Zydokians might call it an enhancement, but in fact, Helper made them addictive. Yes, they'll restore our planet. Only their Earth will be a farm on which the role of cattle will be given to us."

My last words wiped the smirk from the Zydokian's face, he wanted to say something, but Athena stopped him. I didn't even look at the blond. I only cared about my cadets' decision. Deraak seemed shocked and looked at Helper on Athena's hand with disgust, but Anita's face was absolutely calm. She only smiled encouragingly at the blond, comforting him. Realizing that I had finished, Athena rose from the captain's chair.

Athena spoke with soft persistence as if she was explaining something obvious. "A parasite is

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"I can't live without a host, and you can't rebuild your planet. Just like Zydokians weren't capable of solving one serious problem back in the day. We need each other."

I was going to respond, but Anita stepped forward and interrupted me. "Each one of us will get one Helper, that's it?"

"It seems that you have already lost one voice." The confidence returned to the blond, a mocking smile again played on his lips. Athena didn't say anything, only nodded in return.

Anita turned to me. "I'm with them, Ferucii. I'm ready to pay a lot more to leave this ship and go home."

We all looked at Deraak, waiting for his answer. He shifted his gaze from Athena's wrist to me. "I don't like this, Adriana. But we spent so much time in space looking for a new Earth and found nothing. I'm sorry. I just want to return the old one."

Athena looked at the window and smiled, "We arrived. Time flies when the conversation is so pleasant, doesn't it?"

I turned to the window and saw her. She was still far away, but the dark blue waters that surrounded the gray continents, old, forgotten satellites circling around her were already visible. It's hard to believe that once this planet was blue and green. Two ships were already hovering in front of this dark ball. Our home.

Athena approached me. Her movements again became collected and sharp, Helper finished the negotiations. "The fourth ship is coming soon. Four ships. More than two thousand crew members. All that's left of us. The new population of Earth."

"I..."

"Of course, after a failure with your cadets, you want to convince the crew of your ship or all two thousand settlers, right?" She grinned, pleased that she guessed right. "Look at these ships

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What are you

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"More than two thousand ships, and the crew of each ship is already accepted his help. There's no one left to convince to join him, and that's why he's the Helper for the world."

Chapter 11 by Dan Ramazan



"And what will happen to me now?" I no longer wanted to fight.

"It's not my decision," Adamidi said. "Until the Court of captains' decision, you'll be in custody." She smiled. Athena, like me, understood that I didn't need any supervision. Showing me these ships, she achieved what she wanted. I admitted my defeat.

Everything that happened next was like a dream. The last clear memories were the faces in the cockpit. The smile of a Zydokian and the sadness of Deraak. Then I was escorted along the corridors of the ship to the small cabin, that became my prison cell. This was repeated several times: endless corridors, always ending with either a small locked room or huge places where my former colleagues accused me of new charges. Helpers, who now adorned hands of each captain, refused all proposals that there is only one way to deal with an officer who refused to obey. Every life is sacred, no matter what. Of course, I thought, every human life is another host for another Helper. But this time I didn't argue and didn't try to convince anyone. I was just waiting for the end.

I hadn't remembered the names of people who accompanied me during short trips from one prison cell to another. They didn't talk to me, and I didn't try to talk with them. I had no idea how much time passed during these walks through endless corridors. It didn't matter.

All this time, I was only interested in one thought - they couldn't arrange all this for me alone. No matter how often Helpers repeated their sweet speeches about the sacredness of each life, I realized that two thousand people wouldn't have gone through so many difficulties just for me. With all these hearings, there must be others. The hope that there are people, ready to fight Helpers, just like me, was my last thought before going to bed and first on waking. I'm not alone. There are others.

...

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The door opened and I was dragged into the cell.

"Follow me, Ferocii." His face was impenetrable. I also didn't say anything and followed him.

When we moved far enough away from the prison block, Deraak, without slowing down, began to speak.

"They sent me for a reason, Adriana. Today's hearing will be the last. You'll be given a choice. On its basis, a verdict will be passed."

"Let me guess - be a brainless vegetable in a cell or be a brainless vegetable in a brave new world?"

"No, Adriana!" He stopped and turned to me. "If Helper wanted to lock you in a cage, he would have done it already." He fell silent, realizing that he couldn't convince me. "Come, let's make a little detour. I want to show you something."

Again, I followed him. I was ready to take every opportunity to walk, even on these gloomy corridors. Finally, Deraak stopped before another door.

"You better close your eyes," He smiled and opened it.

For a moment, I was blind. For far too long I haven't seen sunlight. When my vision returned to normal, I saw that we were in a glassed corridor between the two buildings. But so quickly restored architecture was far from the most striking. The green meadows beneath us, around the buildings, stretched to the horizon. Thin, weak trees were barely visible from the height of our building.

"They kept their word, Adriana." Deraak showed me his camera. "If you want to see everything closely."

I reached for the camera, but then stopped. "You do this with all the captives, don't you? That's why they kept me locked up for so long. To show me this?"

A faint name off his face and he pressed the button on the camera.

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Forgive me for this little bit of gore, but I think it's important to show that it's not right throughout the story to change people.

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"Right now we can go downstairs and you can smell the forest for the first time in your life, walk on the grass. Just like your ancestors."

I overcame temptations. Now the answers were more important for me. Trying not to look at the bright greenery, which I hadn't even dreamed of seeing, I began to ask questions that tormented me all these days in custody. "What is this all for? I don't believe that every life is really so valuable to you. You almost destroyed a whole ship, and now you're boiling the ocean, just to get me? Soon you'll have a whole planet, millions of animals and plants, on which you can parasitize! Why do you need me?"

"You see only what you want to see - terrible parasites, looking just for food. We stopped feeding on plants millions of years ago. After all, spending hundreds of years in the ground and looking at the ants - it's damn boring. We evolved. When we covered our planet we started to look for something new. We've learned and seen so much since our union with Zydokians." He started to talk faster, more impatient. "They became our eyes and hands in this cold and cruel galaxy. And you, Adriana, can also offer so much more than any other host."

He came up to me. "In fact, Adriana, I'm glad that you don't want to stay on Earth with us. Do you remember how Deraak told you about the choice, a few minutes earlier? I think my offer will interest you."

Chapter 12 by Helena Madsox



"This world, for us, is small." He stared deeply in my eyes. "You see it all as 'important', and yet you understand, unlike them, just like all of us- there is more to life than material things."

He looked out at the people, who may as well be nothing but mindless zombies now. "They all gave themselves up willingly, because they thought it would be better than drifting in space. You saw otherwise." He looked back at me again, biting his lip before continuing. "You realized the importance of your life- *your* life, not just the ideals given to you. You are uncorrupted by your old government, unlike this body I am inhabiting now." I heard a little grunt from Deraak's body,

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“But what happened to Athena?” I asked, growing a bit suspicious. “Did she get a new... *helper*?” I scrunched up my nose at the word, “Or do you all just see everything?”

"The rest of them don't understand. They don't see the importance of emotion." He stared at me intensely, as if yearning for something. "They feed off emotion. I... wish to feel. I have been looking for more. Most memories are shared, for the sake of common knowledge. But yours..." He bit his lip a bit, and looked back and forwards nervously. "I kept them safe. No one else knows.

“They want you just because of your emotion, because that means that much more for them. I... want to know what it’s like to coexist, to feel, to not have to control.

“But I am getting off topic. I saw your dreams. They all shined, glowed with something I cannot comprehend... And... There was him.

"He is the most important thing to you, isn't he? You called him your *son*. And you had to leave him behind." He leaned closer to me, and whispered, "But what if you could see him again?"

"I... what?" I had been speechless up to that point, but my brain had just snapped out of it's shock. "Do NOT joke with me about him."

"But I'm not." He stared at me again. "I have unimaginable knowledge, and... You are more than anyone else. We can bring him back. We can rule this universe. We can join together."

“Do you trust me?” His voice echoed in my mind.

“Do I trust you? Of course I do.” Ahh, yes. That day. When everything changed, when he was dragged off on a mission he would never return from, when I would be stuck with the emotionless shells who were ‘destined’ to pilot my ship.

"Then watch THIS!" The strange maneuvers, the barrel rolls and loops that shook up the entirety of the ship. The cleanup crew always seemed to hate him, but I think they really loved

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"Oh... A message? I can look! Let's see what it is!" I quickly blocked the memory out, only for it to be replaced with another.

"Hey... Adri?" He always called me that, even if I protested, even if my world was ending along with him.

"I know you told me to stay safe. And I did! Just..." The recording had paused and crackled a little. *"I just might not be back as... as soon as I promised..."* I had sniffled, and tears built up in my eyes just as they had in the past. *"They said... they'll give you the best of the best. Someone great will fly your ship!"*

"They won't be as great as you..." I had said, holding on to his voice.

"Look, Adri... My ship's going down. I've been shot. I'll only crash down... I'll..." I still remember clearly how his voice choked over the audio. *"I'll make sure that this gets to you. I only have a few more minutes, so I should stop recording, so, you know, I have time to send it. You always said communications never send well through the ozone layer."* His voice, as he chuckled, was heartbreakingly sad. I could remember my past self, only staring in disbelief. I could feel the tears streaming down my own face.

"Adri? Just promise you'll make it out of here. Okay? I love you... Mom." The recording stopped, and just like that, my world had shattered.

"So..." the Helper's voice cut through my memories. I pressed my hand to my cheek, feeling the wetness, and looked over at the blurry, broken form of Deraak in front of me. *"We can do this. We can bring him back. We can fix it all."*

"I..." I didn't say anything else, choked by my emotions, but I held my arm out. The blurry gray form of the Helper crawled out. The moment it touched my skin, everything faded to white.

"Here we are..." My voice and another one, one that I had vaguely heard in Deraak and Athena, echoed in the brightness. *the only thing I could feel* *"The world has been stopped. We can now*

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I just tested my voice. How do you like it?

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"Then... It will be so." And color drained back into my world, along with a familiar voice, one that I had waited far too long to hear.

the end

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